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DOWN BY THE MURKY RIVERS OF BABYLON

The world's most bizarre trivia is deposited in Hollywood and Kenneth Anger, right, filmmaker and author of *Hollywood Babylon*, is its self-appointed curator. A man obsessed by sex, ritual and magic in his own films, Anger has sifted through the sources of his own neighbourhood: no corner is too dark or dirty, no detail too unwholesome

Report by Mick Brown
Main photograph by Robert Mapplethorpe

Kenneth Anger, aged 5, as the changeling prince in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. It was his first and last Hollywood acting role. Thereafter he held the camera

When Thelma Todd, the silent movie star, was murdered in her garage on the Palisades above Pacific Highway, Kenneth Anger went over to watch them take out the body. "It was only a couple of blocks away." He was five years old.

Anger was 13 when Lupe Velez committed suicide. Lupe was known as the "Mexican Spitfire", the star of *Gaucho* and *Lady of the Pavements*, wife of Johnny Weismuller, lover of John Gilbert, Gary Cooper and sundry cowboys, stuntmen and gigolos. Her career had hit the skids by 1944. She planned a Snow White suicide, to be found by grieving friends and admirers, lying on her bed in her most exquisite satin robe, surrounded by gardenias, tuberoses and altar candles, borne on the wings of an overdose of sleeping pills.

Alas, at the last moment the tablets reacted with the enchillada in Lupe's last supper. Rather than defile her fantasy tableau, she tottered to the toilet to vomit, and drowned with her head in the toilet bowl. The next morning, Kenneth Anger, who knew the star's cook and maid, pored over the details of Lupe's lurid goodbye. The enchillada makes the story, don't you think?

That's Hollywood. Sex, glamour, dreams and nightmares. Life's cruel little ironies. And in the background, a lonely boy with a small notebook, and an unusual sense of humour.

Kenneth Anger published the first volume of *Hollywood Babylon*, while living in Paris in 1960, to instant notoriety. It was not published in its unexpurgated form in America until 1975, and it has never appeared in Britain. Readers learned of Marlene Dietrich's "Sewing Circle" (a clique of bi-sexual swingers); that the young John Wayne had been the 11th man when Clara Bow entertained the entire University of Southern California football team; that Paul Bern had blown his brains out with a ·38 after trying to introduce an artificial penis into the bed he shared with Jean Harlow. But it was Anger's attention to detail →

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camera in his hand from the first. At 17, he made his first exhibited film, *Fireworks* – a violent exercise in homosexual-masochism, made in three days with his grandmother's help while his parents were away, attending an uncle's funeral.

He had already been introduced to the teachings of Aleister Crowley by Jack Parsons, a physicist (he developed the fuel that took the Apollo space shots to the moon) who had been appointed by Crowley to carry on his work after his death. Crowley had visited Hollywood in 1916, and taken note of "the cinema crowd of cocaine-crazed sexual lunatics".

Through Christopher Isherwood and Aldous Huxley, Anger had been exposed to Eastern mysticism, but found it "too tame". Crowley's "pagan revival", he says, "neo-Druidism, without the human sacrificing", suited him better.

In 1950, Anger sold the family silver, and at the invitation of Jean Cocteau, who had seen *Fireworks*, set sail for France. It would prove costly – he was later cut out of his father's will – but a grand adventure. In Paris he became assistant to Henri Langlois at the Cinemathèque Française – a treasure house of vintage movieabilia – while pursuing his own filmmaking activities.

Films like *Scorpio Rising*, *Eaux d'Artifice* and *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome* established Anger's reputation as a filmmaker, and chronicled his obsessions: sex, ritual and magic – film, says Anger, as "spells and invocations".

It is a matter of some pride to him that he has never received a grant for any of these films (if hardly surprising, considering much of the content), relying entirely on his own resources or those of friends and patrons. J. Paul Getty Jnr, another aficionado of old Hollywood, has provided $150,000 for Anger to make his next film, *Mouse Heaven* – a "revised history" of Mickey Mouse.

"Holly Babies I and II", as he calls his books, were written for the money. Which is not to say that he does not take the enterprise seriously, nor that he is not particularly suited to the task.

His manner – cultured, courteous, softly-spoken – encourages the divulging of confidences. His sense of irony, which is acute, is tempered with an air of concern. He is a considerate and, in many ways, generous man, pressing gifts and hospitality unstintingly. He is also conservative, "meaning that I cherish things of value". He is not frivolous. He seems prepared to reveal almost everything of himself with the utmost candour, and yet reveal nothing at all.

Nobody could deny that he is thorough. Consider the case of Hollywood's "mad doctor", the actor Lionel Atwill, who was brought down by a sex-orgy and blackmail scandal involving a 16-year-old runaway who had arrived in Hollywood with stars in her eyes. To elicit the full dirt on the scandal, Anger traced the girl, now a middle-aged farmwife, to her home in Minnesota, >>

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Off-screen: the tanning of Greta Garbo (above); the hangover of W C Fields; the suicide of a star, Carole Landis (below), known in Hollywood as "the studio hooker"

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How it all ended in tears for Mama's boy genius

Busby Berkeley was the undisputed Genius Numero Uno of the Hollywood musical. Yet he was also a bit of a monster, a neurotic alcoholic who killed three persons with his car and later slashed his throat and wrists in a suicide attempt (Berkeley is pictured above on his way to psychiatric treatment).

Although he married five times, the woman in his life was Gertrude Berkeley – Mama, his mentor and his solace.

It was after a party celebrating one of his hit musicals in September 1935 that things began to go seriously wrong in Berkeley's life. As he sped down the twisting Pacific Coast Highway, he lost control of his white roadster and ►

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careered into the path of oncoming traffic. He hit one car, then smashed into another. Three of the occupants of the second car were killed.

Buzz was charged with second degree murder. For Warner Bros this was secondary to the fact that their successful director was locked into a nonstop shooting schedule. Since he was obliged to appear in court during the day, the studio would change the schedules so the films could be shot at night.

The defendant was brought into court on a stretcher. His lawyer exhibited the blown-out left front tyre of Buzz's car, claiming it was the cause of the accident. Several personalities who had been guests at the party – all of them under contract to Warners – testified that Buzz had not been blotto. He was acquitted.

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Midnight
Gov. Reagan Says:
SOME OF MY BEST FRIENDS ARE HOMOSEXUALS

The life and soul of yet another party: "squashbuckling" Errol Flynn, a legend in his own

Off-screen: the burning of Greta Garbo (above); the hangover of W. C. Fields; the suicide of a star, Carole Landis (below), known in Hollywood as "the studio hooker"

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THE WORLD'S BEST-SELLING CIGARETTE.
LOW TO MIDDLE TAR As defined by H.M. Government
DANGER: Government Health WARNING:
CIGARETTES CAN SERIOUSLY DAMAGE YOUR HEALTH.
How it all ended in tears for Mama's boy genius

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Photographs of the mutilated corpse in the "Black Dahlia" case (another runaway, Elizabeth Short, whose butchered remains were discovered in 1947 "laid out for display as if by a roadside vendor") were acquired from a retired detective who had worked on the case, "sort of like Sam Spade in his cups", whom Anger befriended.

Also, Anger was unable to obtain the photograph of James Dean on the mortician's slab, following his fatal car accident, which had been "removed" from police files. "It seemed absurd to me to go beyond $1000 and the person selling it wanted twice that price."

Anger likes the macabre, "to contrast with the glamour". He would see himself as a modern-day Suetonius, the Roman historian who chronicled the doings of the Caesars with unflinching candour.

He has a very clear idea of necessity. "I think you collect your dues." There is a sense, he says, in which he has always considered the movies evil, the day the camera was invented a black cat for mankind. "Although, of course, my definition of evil is not everybody else's. Evil is being involved in the glamour and charm aspect of material existence – glamour in its old Gaelic sense meaning enchantment with the look of things – rather than the soul of things.

"I think there is something in the superstition with which so-called primitive peoples regard the camera as an instrument for stealing their souls."

It is not his intention to wound. Janet Gaynor never complained about his revelation that this silent star was "in fact, quite an aggressive little dyke". There is, his tone suggests, something strangely poignant and endearing about these tales of toxicity, alcoholism and sexual indiscretion, these showgirls and garage mechanics, small town boys and girls who suffered the shock of sudden fame, power and adulation. For rarely nobody lived out Crowley's dictum – "Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the law" – more than these plundered souls; nobody collected more bitter dues.

Were we to meet them now, these ill-starred dreamers, we would probably be struck, he says, by their energy, enthusiasm and boundless optimism. "The sense of the future being filled with infinite possibilities. By comparison now the future looks sinisterer."

Anger dislikes modern Hollywood, its nackiness, the tawdry retailing of its own myths. But one senses that this reflects a more general disenchantment with the present, the fact that Hollywood "no longer has an exclusive patent on sin. It's difficult to shock people any more. Hollywood has an epidemic of cocaine taking, for example, but so does Wall Street and the middle-class. It's part of the culture."

There is perhaps some irony then that Anger's personal star should now be rising higher than ever. After a period of quiescence his film career is flourishing. And there are plans for a documentary of *Hollywood Babylon*, with Anger giving a guided tour of places of historical and cultural interest: Thelma's garage, Lupe's hacienda . . . that sort of thing.

"I'm an Aquarian with Scorpio rising, which is a difficult mixture. I like to be creating, and I know that if I don't create I will get into mischief, unconsciously. Destructive things will happen. It's better I'm busy."

Twice a year, at the autumn and spring equinox, Anger can himself off from the outside world and retreats to an isolated stench of the Hudson River to practise Crowley's system of Magickal Retirement, "a kind of psychic waxing up". He tastes occasionally with a group of Crowleyans in New York, a branch of Crowley's Ordo Templi Orientis. A number of them are scientists.

It is possible they know Kenneth Anger as well as anybody. He has many acquaintances. He even has a fan club in Japan: they knit him sweaters. But he has few friends. The fairy lights around the throne of Rudolph Valentino twinkle gently; the ghosts of old Hollywood crowd round. "I see", says Kenneth Anger, "a rather difficult person."

Hollywood Babylon 1F by Kenneth Anger is published by Arrow on January 23 at £5.95.

BRIDGE
Boris Schapiro

MEPHISTO
Christmas Crackers

CHESS
Bernard Cafferty

BRAINTEASER
Peter Bryant (29)
Unwanted Gifts

BOOKWISE
Ann Gooll

DIARY OF THE TIMES CLASSIFIEDS

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Were we to meet them now, these ill-starred dreamers, we would probably be struck, he says, by their energy, enthusiasm and boundless optimism. "The sense of the future being filled with infinite possibilities. By comparison now the future looks ominous."

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□ *'Hollywood Babylon II' by Kenneth Anger is published by Arrow on January 23 at £5.95.*

that provoked awe. The toilet bowl in which Lupe Velez ended her days was an Egyptian Chartreuse Onyx Hush-Flush Model DeLuxe.

Volume two of *Hollywood Babylon*, to be published in Britain next month, continues the theme. Here is the explanation for that peculiar itching which James Dean felt in his crotch while filming *Rebel Without A Cause*; the truth about the love affair of Joe Kennedy – paterfamilias of the Kennedy dynasty – and Gloria Swanson; pictorial proof of what Carmen Miranda wore under her frocks (nothing), and a catalogue of Hollywood suicides which vividly displays Anger's crisp, bracing authorial style. "She offed herself with an overdose of barbiturates in her Beverly Hills apartment on September 11, 1971 . . . His body rotted in Chihuahua for a week before his family turned up to claim it . . . He died after four days of agony as the chemical gnawed through his guts . . . It is surely fortuitous, but Otto Preminger holds the record for the director with the highest number of suicides among his leading ladies: Maggie McNamara, Dorothy Dandridge and Jean Seberg . . ." Then there's "Mousie" who "finally jumped off the terrace in a fit of suicidal canine despair". The last, it should be said, recalls the tragic end of starlet Linda Christian's pet chihuahua, which took the leap after it had been evicted from Christian's bed to make way for her latest boy friend.

★ ★ ★

I first met Kenneth Anger nine years ago in London. He was in town for a retrospective of the films which had established him as one of the most iconoclastic and idiosyncratic filmmakers in America. The fact that he is also one of the world's foremost authorities on Aleister Crowley, the English occultist whom Lord Beaverbrook once described as "the wickedest man in the world", had been duly digested. As had the fact that it was Anger who had inspired the Rolling Stones' song *Sympathy For The Devil*. Marianne Faithfull, who featured in Anger's *Lucifer Rising* – a film designed to depict the Christian devil in his pre-

Early thoughts in the presidential career

gnostic status as "the bringer of light" – had expressed puzzlement over her part in the film, declaring she would not understand it until she had seen it three times "on opium if necessary".

It is not demons that haunt Kenneth Anger, but ghosts. The ghost of Rudolph Valentino, for example, with which Anger now lives, in a small apartment on New York's Upper East Side.

Of the four rooms, two are blue, two blood red, the colours reflected in walls, ceilings, carpets, furnishings, the blinds which shut out the afternoon sun. Valentino is everywhere. Portraits gaze from the walls. Valentino busts, dolls and ephemera cover every surface. There, framed, is the contract between Valentino and his manager, George Ullman. And a small and exquisite shrine to the dead actor, once the property of Dirta Flame, the famous "Lady In Black" who would appear at Valentino's graveside on every anniversary of his death. Valentino, Anger tells you, begot shrines. Ramon Novarro, the actor, kept his own shrine to Valentino in his bedroom; it contained a black, lead, Art Deco dildo, embellished with Valentino's silver signature.

Anger talks in a whisper, appropriate to the presence of the dead. The apartment is still, eerie, fastidiously tidy, the detritus of daily life shockingly absent. A black shroud covers the refrigerator. It contains only papers. Anger will not have food or drink in his home. "I'm the curator," he says, "of my own museum." For this is not a place to live, but to escape. It is the past.

★ ★ ★

Dirta Flame was not alone in her vigils at Valentino's tomb. Anger, too, was drawn to gravesides, Valentino's in particular. His passion for the doomed actor was inculcated by his grandmother. Anger grew up in Hollywood, an unwanted child, the last of three children – ten years younger than his brother. Anger's father was an aeronautics engineer who showed little interest in his upbringing. His grandmother had worked for United Artists as a wardrobe mistress on silent epics, including Valentino's last two films. Her stories of Rudy, Cecil B. DeMille and Lillian Gish were, he says, "my Grimm's fairy tales".

It was she who introduced the five-year-old Anger to the film director Max Reinhardt, who in 1935 cast him as the changeling prince in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. And what a dream! Scampering in spangles and plumes through an enchanted forest thrown up on the backlot of Warner's studios, dazzled by klieg lights and the heady aroma of shellac. He would never act again, but the bug had taken hold. From his chemistry class in the Beverly Hills High School, Anger could look down into the Grotto of Miracles where *The Song of Bernadette* was being filmed. Every time he picked up a newspaper somebody else seemed to have died.

He had his parents' home movie ➔

The life and soul of yet another pa